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## Bush budget slashes health care money for uninsured

By [Phil Galewitz](#)

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With the number of Americans without health insurance increasing, the federal government has shifted much of the burden for their medical care to states and counties.

Now President Bush wants to eliminate two federal programs that help states and communities find new ways to assist the uninsured and to gather information on the mounting problem.

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As part of his plan to trim the \$2.5 trillion federal budget, Bush recently proposed cutting the \$84 million Healthy Communities Access Project, money that this year helps Palm Beach County and 45 other cities and counties in 25 states to better coordinate health care for the uninsured.

Miami-Dade, Polk and Lake counties, as well as Kissimmee, also are getting money from the Healthy Communities project.

Bush has also proposed cutting the \$10.9 million in state planning grants that are used by policy-makers to study demographics of the uninsured so they can target their money most appropriately.

One of those grants, worth \$975,000, last year paid for a University of Florida study on the uninsured in the Sunshine State, a report that showed the rate of uninsured residents has increased dramatically since 1999 in most areas of the state.

Bush administration officials say both programs have run their course and the uninsured are best served by his plan to expand the number of community health centers nationwide.

The president has proposed increasing spending on the centers by \$350 million to \$2 billion in the 2006 fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1.

But health experts and health care officials say that although community health centers help millions of uninsured every year, the medical care available in these settings is often limited because of a lack of specialty physicians, prescription drugs and hospital services.

That's where Health Communities programs have been filling in the gaps.

Even executives at large community health centers say they worry about getting more money in the 2006 federal budget to the detriment of a program that helps communities coordinate health care for the uninsured.

"The Healthy Communities program is a positive thing, and it grates on me that we may get funded at the cost of it," said David Myers, CEO of Metro Community Provider Network, which runs 19 community health centers in suburban Denver.

Should Congress go along with Bush's plans to cut the Healthy Communities programs, these experts and officials say, the pain will be felt here and in many other communities that have come to depend on the federal support to maintain and expand health care access for those without private medical insurance.

Three-year grant locally

The Health Care District of Palm Beach County last fall was awarded a three-year, \$2.2 million grant to help identify uninsured

residents who qualify for existing public health programs such as Medicaid and the state Children's Health Insurance Program. The program is expected to start in the Belle Glade area this year and expand countywide in 2006 and 2007.

Belle Glade, Pahokee and other towns around Lake Okeechobee have the highest rates of uninsured residents in the county. Close to a third of the people living in the far western region of the county are uninsured.

The health district plans to open several "benefit banks," or places where people can go to determine what government services they qualify for. Today, residents must go to several county and state agencies to determine what programs they are eligible for.

Heath District CEO Dwight Chenette said he's confident Congress will continue financing the state grant program that the district has tapped. He said Bush has tried to kill the program each of the past three years. The grant program was started by President Clinton in 2000.

If the program is scrapped, Chenette doesn't know whether the district will get its money for the final two years of the grant. So far, the district has received \$1 million, or slightly less than half the money it expects to get.

Broward County has used about \$2 million in grant money to provide disease management to 1,860 uninsured residents with asthma, diabetes and AIDS. The program resulted in those patients being admitted to the hospital less and reduced emergency room visits, a recent study found.

"I'm very disappointed the president is not investing in both the Healthy Communities and state planning grants," said Terry Stoller, a health care consultant in Cleveland who studies community efforts to help the uninsured get medical care. "In fact, the Healthy Communities program could benefit from more investment to promote strategies with proven results and long-term sustainability."

Since the program began, the number of Healthy Communities Access Programs has grown to 193 nationwide.

Several communities have used the taxpayer money to better coordinate care for the uninsured at hospitals, clinics and private physicians. For example, in Austin, Texas, community leaders used \$4 million to develop a shared medical record system so uninsured patients could be tracked no matter where they went for care. They also developed a computer program for all of the city's health and social service providers to more easily identify residents that qualify for government assistance.

Each Healthy Communities program is different and tailored to the individual area. Most rely on public money and private entities to meet one pressing community health need, such as screening for diabetes.

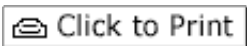
In Tucson, Ariz., a \$740,000 Healthy Communities grant spurred the creation of a program that links low-income uninsured adult residents with an affordable, comprehensive and coordinated network of health care providers. The program has enrolled more than 8,000 since 2001.

In Phoenix, a \$1.3 million grant helped establish a coordinated program for the uninsured that provides physician care as well as drug coverage and dental and vision services. More than 1,000 people have signed up since it started in July.

"I am a Republican and I have serious concerns about President Bush eliminating this program," said Susan McLeod, a spokeswoman for HealthCare Connect, the Phoenix program. "We have a great Republican model of using private and public resources, and I hope the Congress can see that."

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